

Sometimes Canned Peas

Do it because she's your husband's mother. He's talked with his brother, and they've decided that you'll be perfect. At 56, you don't have a job, really, in the technical sense of the word. Freelance writing, in the world of engineers and accountants, is not a real career. Your husband makes enough money to support both of you. You have extra space. You can even build an apartment for her onto the back of your house. Plus, you have experience. You're good at this, he says. You've cared for people all your life.

Wish that you did not have "experience," not the kind that he is referring to. Wish that you never told him about the two years in college you sat with Mrs. Cole so that her daughter could go to church and choir practice twice a week. You think that you should tell him more about that time. That you despised Mrs. Cole, her smell, the way her skin folded around her neck making a pallet for her chin. That you despised her not for her age or her ineptitude, but for the sad, lost look in her eyes—the look that showed you what she wanted, waited for, every day.

You think you should tell him that each day you sat with her at the dinner table, watching her drool onto the wooden tiles of the Scrabble board, you wondered how much longer you both would have to wait for her to die. You want to tell him things about Mrs. Cole that you've never told anyone. That you were supposed to play games to engage her 98-year-old mind and her eyes, but you got tired of correcting her when she placed X's and B's on the middle of the board. So, four weeks in, you let her spell whatever she wanted, XTRFK, BZMLTKY, while you arranged your letters into words, like commands, that you knew she couldn't see, pushing her toward the thing that she seemed to want the most. Expire. Decease. Terminate. Croak.

Don't tell him these things. Say "No" when he asks if you mind watching her. Add "not at all" to make it seem genuine.

* * *

Move your husband's mother into your son's old bedroom until the construction on her apartment is finished. This will take a month, at least.

Before she arrives, paint the walls the wrong color. You will not know this at the time. She will tell you.

"Is that blue?" she will ask.

"Is what blue?" She has not figured out that the people she talks to are not aware of the conversations that she begins in her head.

"The walls, Linda. What else is there?"

You are standing in a freshly-painted, empty room.

"No, they're—"

"They look blue."

"They're lavender."

"They make me feel claustrophobic."

♦ ♦ ♦

Call your mother. When she asks about your mother-in-law, tell her about the walls and the bouts of claustrophobia. Try not to sound whiney. You want her to know that if she ever needed to, she would be welcome in your house. Hope that she never needs to.

You mother and her sister, Ida, bought a house together after your father passed away five years ago. It's a small, two-bedroom place that sits across the street from your parents' old house. Since you've moved to Charlotte, from Baton Rouge, you visit every holiday for as long as Richard can take off of work. When you do, you stay in a hotel three miles from their place.

♦ ♦ ♦

Follow the electrician around your house as he installs intercom speakers in every room. After the third time he asks if he can help you, tell him you're writing a how-to guide for elderly-proofing a home. When he nods and continues working, fight the urge to tell him that you are a freelance writer and a frequent contributor to *Fifty* magazine. Even if he believes you, he will not care.

Continue the conversation in your head, instead. Tell him that you won three Sally-Rose prizes for the reporting you did at *The Advocate* in Baton Rouge, which is a record, and that the previous record for Sally-Rose awards was held by Hazel Wilburn for nearly 35 years. (Do not tell him that this was thirteen years ago, before you moved to Charlotte, and that it is quite possible that some new reporter has trumped your record.) Imagine the whistle that this declaration invokes; scrunch your face and wave your hand in an "it's nothing, really" motion.

When you catch the electrician watching you, realize that, while you had managed to internalize your pretend conversation with him, you were still fanning the air in front of you as if one of the two of you had passed gas. Leave the room.

♦ ♦ ♦

Argue with your husband over his proposal to repaint the walls of your son's old room a dark-green color.

"Blue makes her feel claustrophobic," he says.

"They're not blue, Richard," you say. "They're lavender. Purple."

"Close enough," he says.

Remind him you just painted that room. Remind him that her apartment will be finished in a month and that the walls will be painted whatever color she chooses. Will him to remember that you hate the color green.

He shrugs. Wait for him to remind you of her age.

"She's eighty-seven years old," he says and, with that, ends the conversation.

♦ ♦ ♦

Sit across from your mother-in-law at the dining room table on the nights that Richard does not make it home in time for dinner and watch her nudge peas and carrots around her plate with a spoon. To break the silence, tell her a joke that you read earlier that day in *Reader's Digest*. Laugh out loud, even though she does not.

"What kind of peas are these?" she says.

"English."

"I know they're English peas. Don't I look old enough to recognize English peas?"

Say nothing. This is a rhetorical question.

"They taste like they're from a can," she says.

"They are from a can."

Here she lets out a sound of general disgust.

"I knew they tasted like they were from a can," she says.

♦ ♦ ♦

Practice patience. This will be difficult and will never seem worth it.

Before you bathe, visit her bedroom and ask if there is anything that she needs. When she says no, run yourself a hot bubble bath. Light four candles. Relax. Begin reading a borrowed Jackie Collins novel.

At this time, her pantyhose begin to cut off her circulation. You are three pages from the end of chapter one when she makes the announcement. It's her arthritis, she says. She can't grab ahold of them.

Continue reading. She is an adult and is capable of undressing herself. She is not *your* mother.

Your mother can and always has taken care of herself. She pays her own bills and cooks (sometimes canned peas) and cleans for herself. She does

not wear circulation-obstructing pantyhose that she cannot remove without another's assistance.

"Linda!" your mother-in-law screams into the speaker.

Even though you expect it, you are still not used to hearing her voice whining from the speaker above the toilet. Since your son moved to Virginia for college six years ago and then to Detroit with his new wife, to be closer to *her* family, you had grown used to the silence that thickened the air in your house. You had invented new ways to spend your time.

Allow yourself to sink into the water until your face is submerged. Wonder how long you can hold your breath. Count.

At seventeen, sit up, gasping for breath. Wonder who coined the phrase *gasping for breath*. Wonder if it's possible for a healthy person to drown herself in a bathtub without the assistance of anything to hold her down. Decide that it is not possible. Decide that the body's survival instinct is too strong.

♦ ♦ ♦

Hire a sitter to stay with your mother-in-law while you and your husband go to dinner to celebrate your silver anniversary. Think that her health is not so poor that she cannot be alone for a few hours, but refrain from telling your husband that he is being over-protective. Instead, imagine that he has secretly arranged for the sitter to stay overnight so that he can rush you away to a romantic hotel.

During dinner, nod as your husband talks about work and his newest client. He is an accountant for Grant and Waterhouse in downtown Charlotte. He is still wearing the clothes that he wore to work this morning. He is good at what he does.

Order a margarita with an extra shot of tequila. Ignore your husband's raised eyebrows. He will order a ginger ale with no ice. Convince yourself that this is what will happen next:

He will take your hand as you leave the restaurant. At the car, before he opens the door, he will spin you around and kiss you the way you were kissed when you were seventeen. (You remember kissing David Johnson when you were seventeen and while you don't remember much about the actual kiss, you are sure you were both ruled by passion.) Then, he'll remove his tie and wrap it around your eyes before helping you into the car.

When he helps you out of the car again and through an automatic door, you'll hear classical music and the soft murmur of conversation. You'll hear the ding of an elevator and feel your stomach drop slightly as it carries you to a different floor.

Inside your room, you will let him undress you. He will have arranged

for a bubble bath to be waiting. You will spend the night letting him touch you.

Order two more margaritas—one for you and one for him. When he doesn't drink his, drink it for him. Toast to twenty five beautiful years.

On the way home, tell him that you want to go dancing. That you love dancing. That you used to be a beautiful dancer. Lift your hands in the air and gyrate your hips against the car seat as a demonstration. Shake your breasts.

At home, he helps you inside, out of your clothes, and into your favorite flannel pajamas. Sleep beside him in bed for two hours before relocating to the bathroom next to the toilet.

* * *

Find a note taped to the bathroom mirror the next morning. *Take the day off*, it says. Try not to look at yourself in the mirror. You will look even worse than you feel. Run a hot shower and sit beneath the water until it begins to get cold. Dry off and change into clean pajamas.

Expect your husband to be in the kitchen brewing coffee, reading the newspaper, maybe playing Scrabble with the woman who gave him birth. Do not visibly react when you see Maria, the sitter, instead. Say hello, pour yourself a glass of water, then go to your room.

Spend the rest of the day watching movies about people who are not you. Begin with *9½ Weeks*. Cry when Mickey Rourke talks about his mother. Remember the night, when you still lived in Baton Rouge, when Richard called in sick at work then tied you to the headboard of your bed with a scarf.

* * *

Go to bed at the same time as your husband. Because you have been married twenty-five years, you have figured out a system to let each other know, without much effort, that you are interested in sex. It goes like this: If he's in the mood, he runs his toe against your shin. If you're in the mood, you circle his belly button with your finger.

Circle his belly button with your finger.

When he smiles at you and kisses the top of your head, stay positive. A healthy sex life is key for a healthy relationship.

Say: "I'm sorry about last night."

"What are you sorry for? We had fun."

Here, he will kiss your forehead. Do not despair.

Say: "Well, I had hoped we could—you know..."

When he laughs, he is not mocking you. He laughs because he is happy.

Or because he is turned on. Or because he is a man and that is what men do when their wives want to have sex and they do not.

Slide your hand up his thigh and into his boxers.

"Linda," he says, laughing again and removing your hand. "Mother's in the next room."

♦ ♦ ♦

Imagine her death. Do not hope for it, necessarily; rather, imagine how it would feel. Practice your grief the way you would rehearse for a play or a piano recital. Say *It is a very sad day for us all* in front of the mirror. Imagine Richard standing next to you, squeezing your hand. You are his wife; this is your job. Look down at the countertop and let your eyes water slightly. Sit against the wall, opposite the toilet, and stare, mournfully, at the speaker. Remember, fondly, her voice following you around the house and into your showers, until you hear her voice, the real and very alive one, break the silence.

"Linda," she says. "We have a problem."

Wait to agree until you have heard what she believes the problem is.

♦ ♦ ♦

Call your son, Tanner. When his wife answers, make small talk. Realize, perhaps for the first time, that you, too, are a mother-in-law. They are still newlyweds. Her voice sounds hurried and uncomfortable.

Say: "How is the gallery? Are you getting much business?"

Say: "Are the two of you liking the new house?"

Say: "Are you getting much snow? I'm sure Detroit is beautiful at this time of year."

When she answers yes to all of your questions, ask to speak to Tanner. She says that he ran to the store, but he should be back soon. She'll have him call you.

Say: "Thanks."

Hold the receiver against your ear until she hangs up the phone and a busy signal replaces the silence.

♦ ♦ ♦

Sit at your kitchen counter with a glass of milk and a package of Oreos open in front of you. Your husband is asleep in your bed, and his mother is asleep across the hall, in your son's old room.

Look through an album of pictures from when Tanner was young, occasionally dunking a cookie into your milk and licking the black crumbs from your fingers. In the pictures, everyone is happy, everyone is laughing. Pull one of Tanner and Richard out from the plastic that protects it. The

picture is stuck slightly, so edge your fingers in and break the seal that formed long ago.

The back of the picture tells their ages. Richard, 37, and Tanner, 2. The front shows Richard holding Tanner against his side. The boy is turned towards the camera with both arms extended towards you. His mouth is open and, even on the old faded print, you can see the tears that have leaked down his cheek.

Carry the picture with you to the bookshelf in your living room and take down the engagement picture of Tanner and his wife. Open the back of the frame and place the old photo on top of the new one. The picture of Tanner and Elizabeth is larger than the old one, a 3 ½ x 5, and it shows through in the space between the frame and the smaller picture.

Close the frame and set it back in its spot on the shelf. Around the picture of Tanner reaching for you, you see a blue screen and your son's hand, his fingers laced between those of his wife.

* * *

Hide your excitement when construction on your mother-in-law's apartment is complete. The walls still need to be painted a dark-green color. Ask your husband to take off work so the two of you can get the apartment painted and your mother-in-law moved in. He has planned to hire a paint crew, but they are not available until Monday of next week. Try not to sound anxious or impatient.

When he agrees, do not act surprised, although you never expected him to say yes. Begin in the kitchen. Your mother-in-law supervises from a folding chair in the middle of the room until the paint makes her feel light-headed. Help her to your son's old bedroom. Give her a glass of water and a warm washcloth, then sit in the chair beside Tanner's bed until she falls asleep. Resume painting.

* * *

Meet the movers at the door on Tuesday when they arrive to transfer her furniture from the storage shed to her new apartment. Your mother-in-law places herself, once again, in a folding chair in the middle of the room and gives orders as to where everything should be placed. By noon, she is exhausted. Place clean sheets on her bed and let her nap in her new room.

Spend the afternoon hanging pictures of her family. Most are faded black-and-white portraits of people you do not know. In these pictures, she looks more like Richard than you've ever noticed. They have the same nose and jaw line. Her eyes, though, are smaller, more slanted, than your husband's.

Study a picture of her that she has placed in an over-sized, gold frame. She

is standing in front of a house with her hands clinching those of her two sons, one on each side of her. Both boys are young, under six, and she appears to be in her late twenties, maybe thirties. Recognize the way that she holds their hands, the way that she stares, focused and balanced, into the lens.

♦ ♦ ♦

Ask your son, when he calls, what his plans are for Christmas. Because Richard does not want his mother to fly, you are hosting Christmas at your house this year. You have purchased a plane ticket for your mother and your aunt.

"Well," your son says over the phone. "Liz and I decided to stay here."

Say: "Oh."

"It's just that it's our first Christmas in Detroit," he says.

Do not correct him. Do not remind him that last Christmas he did not join you and Richard at your mother's house in Baton Rouge.

"Liz is excited," he says. "She's bought all kinds of decorations and has been busy getting the place ready."

Say: "Oh, sure. The first Christmas in a new house is exciting."

"I'm sorry, Mom," he says. "We'll plan to make it back to Carolina for Easter."

Bite your lip and cover the mouthpiece of the phone.

"Mom?" Tanner says.

Say: "I'm here, baby. Easter sounds great."

♦ ♦ ♦

Kneel in front of your Christmas tree on Christmas Eve and call out the names on each package before passing them to your husband. Your mother-in-law is sitting alone in the middle of the sofa. Your mother and aunt have taken the recliners.

After you've handed him the last gift, turn around and watch your husband place it on the stack in front of your mother. He is wearing a Santa hat with a fuzzy white ball hanging down beside his ear. Your mother smiles up at him and grabs at his shirt, pulling him down for a hug. He lets himself be taken and pats her back.

Say: "Well? How do we start?"

"Oldest goes first," Ida says.

Everyone looks at your mother-in-law and she smiles and takes the package from the top of her stack. Sit beside her and watch her open it. Her hand shakes as she runs her fingers along the edge where the paper was taped against itself. She pulls the paper from the box and it drops off of her lap and onto the floor. She digs her fingers into the crack of the box where the edges come together and pulls against the tape, but it doesn't budge.

Say: "I'll get it."

Reach into her lap and use your nails to cut through the tape that holds the box together. Your forearm presses against the skin of her arm. It feels soft and smooth, like a child's.

She reaches both hands into the box and pulls out a gold-colored photo album.

"What'd you get?" Ida says.

She lifts the album into the air, blocking her face.

"Who's it from?" your mother says. It's something she asked you each Christmas when you were young, even when the gift was from her.

Your mother-in-law reaches down and picks up the paper that has fallen to the floor in front of her. She squints at the tag.

"Love, Linda," she says.

Say: "It's for your pictures."

She nods at your obvious statement and places the album back into the box.

"Thank you," she says, and sets the box on the floor, next to her stack of unopened gifts.